

JAG officer defines her role

Lawyer compares notes with television show

By Capt. Cindy Holt
8th Fighter Wing Judge Advocate

Last week, an officer asked me, “What kind of lawyer are you?” As the officer waited for an answer, I wondered what kind of answer he expected. I considered answering that I am the kind of lawyer that flies an F-14, disarms nuclear missiles, speaks Russian and three other foreign languages, and can crack into any computer network. In fact, I’ve given that answer before, but find that if the listener understands the TV show reference, it usually opens up an entirely new line of questions, such as “does the Navy really only have three JAGs?” “Are Air Force JAG Headquarters that nice?” “Why don’t Air Force JAGs fly F-16s?” So, I decided I should not give the standard “JAG” answer.

I then considered answering, “I’m a fair lawyer on the side of truth and justice.” It sounded very diplomatic, but fairness is both subjective and objective, and while I can strive to be fair, it’s not really my opinion that counts. I then considered whether the person just wanted to hear about my day at Kunsan, and wondered whether I could even sum it up. It’s usually not as glamorous as what Marine Lt. Col. Sarah Mackenzie and Navy Cmdr. Harmon Rabb do in a day on “JAG.”

My days might be filled with reviewing reports of investigations and discussing them with commanders. During an exercise - or when the war starts - I would help defend the base (hooah). Occasionally there is a court-martial. It’s typical to field questions from other organizations about using government resources to help locals or holding a fundraiser at the next block party. Some days are filled with “non-legal” tasks like writing performance reports and awards packages. Sometimes, it’s meeting, after meeting, after meeting.

I have never been called upon to fly a fighter aircraft of any type! I realized that I couldn’t give that answer since it’s infinitely less sexy than the JAG role has been portrayed in film or TV. Finally, the officer breaks my thought-process by asking, “Are you prosecution or defense? Are you the good guy or the bad guy?”

Now I was faced with an entirely new question that a civilian lawyer might be able to answer in one sentence, but most Air Force lawyers cannot. I’m not a defense counsel, although I have been one. That role is assigned to an independent officer who works in a separate building and reports to an off-base JAG. While I could be a prosecutor, I have no immediate plans to be the prosecutor, or what we call “trial counsel” for any docketed case. I may advise on military justice matters and wing discipline, but that doesn’t necessarily mean I will prosecute anyone for anything at all. Plus, I wouldn’t prosecute anyone anyway the United States would.

I then pondered the second part of the question — “Is one type the good guy and the other the bad guy?” Should I simply answer that while individuals in the legal office advise commanders on disciplinary matters and work for the Wolf, the guy down the street is there to protect individual rights, and protect the interests of anyone who may be facing prosecution or Article 15 action, negative performance

reports, even letters of counseling? Sometimes there may be a “bad guy” in the picture, but hopefully it’s not one of the lawyers!

I decided there was a better answer. I am more than a lawyer; I am an Air Force Judge Advocate. I wear a military uniform because I have taken an oath to defend my country. I am a line officer, eligible to command other line officers, and subject to the same rights and duties of any combatant.

As judge advocates, my peers and I received our commissions and training from the Air Force academy, Reserve Officer Training Corps, and Officer Training School. Many of us have served in other career fields prior to becoming a JAG. I am responsible for protecting the world’s best military justice system - a system that provides commanders the means to administer fair, swift justice and promote a cohesive and effective fighting force, while protecting the fundamental legal rights of every Air Force member. I go where the Air Force needs me, responding to disasters and deploying with commanders to support the Air Force mission. I work with war planners and targeteers to ensure that no American will be “delivered to the Hague” for a war crimes trial. Yes, as a lawyer, I could make more money on the outside, but I am fortunate to earn much more while serving my country.

I have the opportunity to travel throughout the world as an officer in the world’s best Air Force, and to serve in locations like the Republic of Korea. I am fortunate to serve because the service is extremely challenging, exciting and rewarding. I am blessed to serve with people who personify “service before self,” and I have made some wonderful life-long friends who live around the world.

After what seemed like five minutes, but was perhaps only five seconds, I answered, “What kind of lawyer am I? I am more than a lawyer, I am an officer in the U.S. Air Force, and I am a judge advocate.”

“I am more than a lawyer; I am an Air Force Judge Advocate. I wear a military uniform because I have taken an oath to defend my country. I am a line officer, eligible to command other line officers, and subject to the same rights and duties of any combatant.”

—Capt. Cindy Holt
8th Fighter Wing Judge Advocate

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Col. Burt Field
8th Fighter Wing commander

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| Commissary manager..... | 782-4144 |
| Computer help desk..... | 782-2666 |
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The editorial content is edited, prepared, and provided by the 8th Fighter Wing Public Affairs office of Kunsan Air Base, Republic of Korea, which is located at Building 1305. The public affairs address

is 8th FW/PA, PSC 2 Box 2090, APO AP 96264.

Deadline for submissions to the *Wolf Pack WARRIOR* is no later than Thursday, 4:30 p.m., one week prior to publication.

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